Blue Sixths

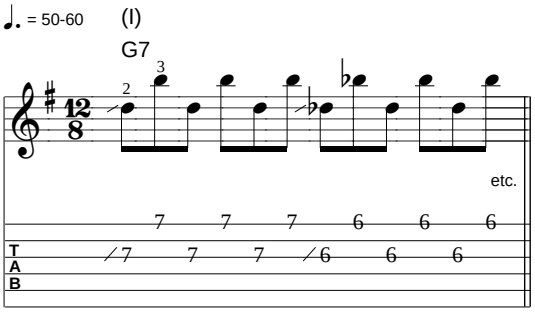
BY JUDE GOLD

CHANCES ARE WHEN Jimi Hendrix was playing timeless blues intros like the one presented in **Ex. 1**—which is similar to the opening notes of "Red House"—he wasn't consciously thinking, "I'm now fretting the interval of a major sixth for two beats and then moving it down a half-step." But like great blues players before and after him, Hendrix used intervals of major or minor sixths all the time because these grips— when played with passion and conviction—have a mesmerizing, open sound.

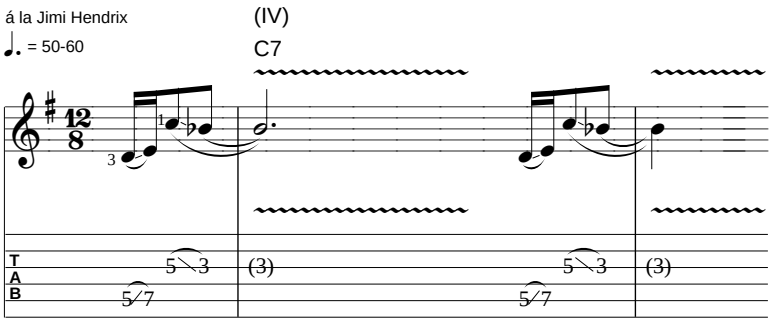
While Ex. 1 may be one of the most popular sounds in the history of the blues, an equally tasty but less common example of a blues-inflected sixth is shown in **Ex. 2**.

Nobody's sixths had more sting than those of Albert King.

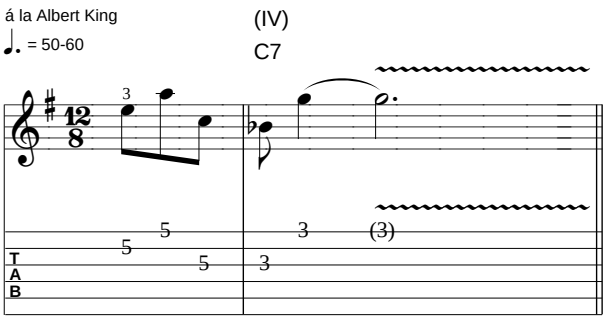
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



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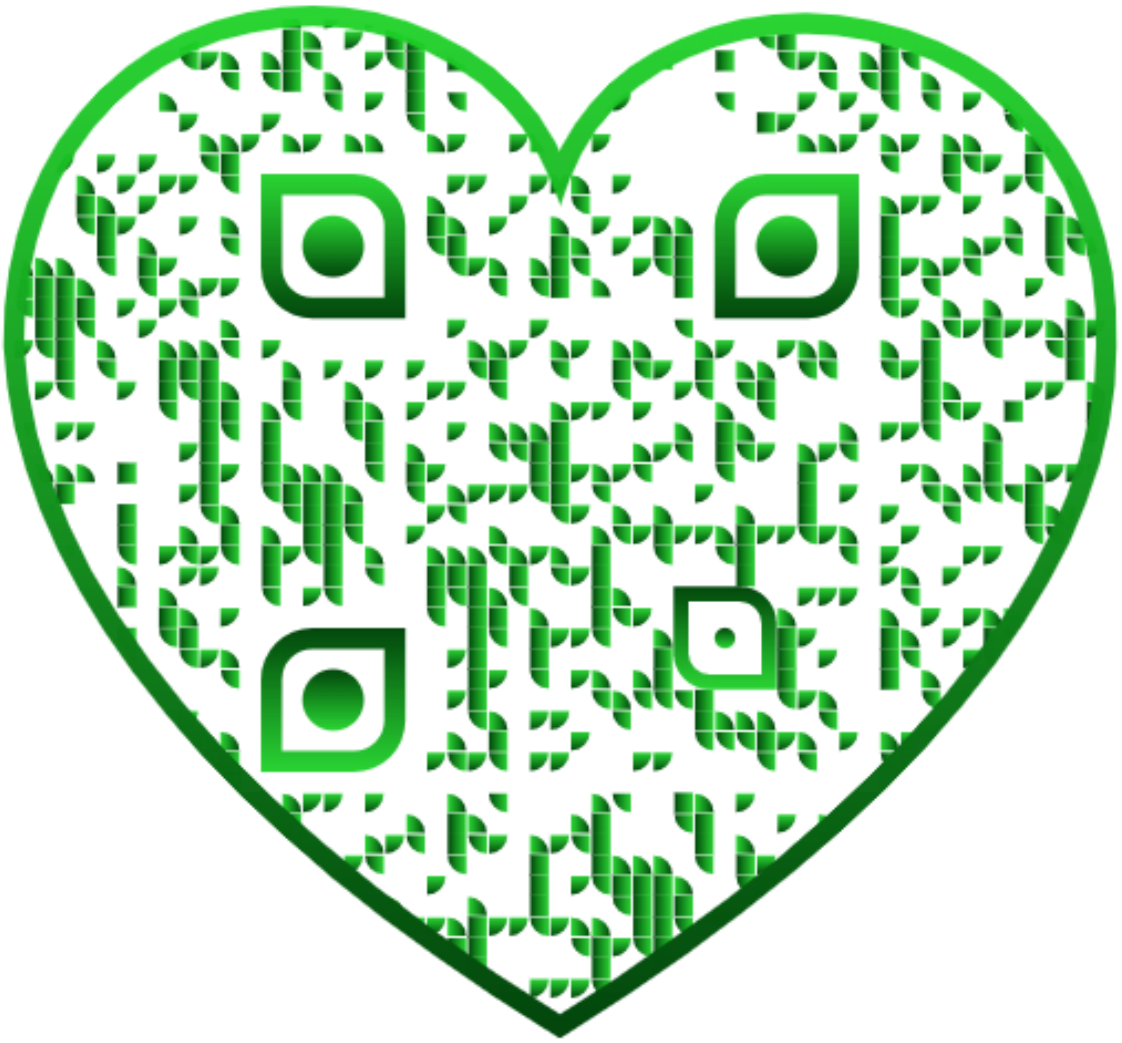


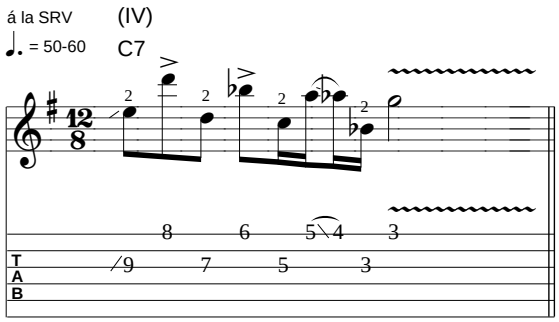
Hendrix sometimes played this lick when approaching the IV chord of a slow 12-bar blues in *G*. This lick gets its savory flavor from the minor sixth that occurs between *E* and *C*, just before *C* slides down to *B*♭. To ensure this meaty maneuver has a huge emotional impact, play it not just with your fingers, but also with your *heart*—as well as a warm, biting tone and a lyrical vibrato.

As shown in **Ex. 3**, the great Albert King had a punchy way of handling the IV chord in a *G* blues involving two major sixths—one between *C* and *A*, the other between *B*♭ and *G*. Stevie Ray Vaughan, who wore his King influence proudly, added some hot sauce to Ex. 3's moves, evolving them to the feisty IV-chord riff in **Ex. 4**. One reason Vaughan got such a fiery mojo out of these descending major and minor sixths was because he absolutely *killed* the notes with his pick. To keep unwanted strings from ringing, the Texas powerhouse intuitively muted unused strings with the underside his fretting-hand fingers and thumb.

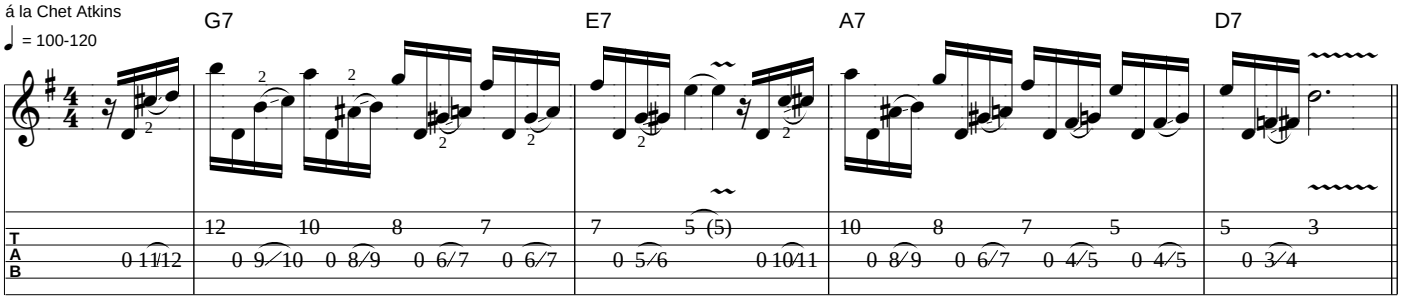
Finally, don't forget that blue sixths can also come in country colors. And when Chet Atkins was manning the fretboard, the melodic results, as you might expect, were often spectacular. **Ex. 5** demonstrates how Atkins used major and minor sixths chromatically to nail the sweet tones in a I-VI-II-V progression in *G* over a quick two-step rhythm. Once you learn the layout of this riff, you'll find it's easy and fun to play, thanks to the open *D* string that precedes each interval of a sixth.

Chet Atkins, unplugged in 1984.

Ex. 4



Ex. 5



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